

## Still on the beat (or would be)

*J educators value professional involvement, want more*

by Ted Pease

*Journalism and mass communication educators have some impressive professional credentials. This survey shows many itch for a chance to get back to the newsroom part-time to keep their skills and knowledge sharp and maintain industry contacts. Many say such professional activity improves both their teaching and research.*

On one side is a communications industry with constant concerns of excellence, competitive edge and bottom line. On the other, a veritable horde of former communications professionals hungry to enrich their academic lives and keep their skills sharp through part-time work in the industry.

In the abstract, the potential mutual benefits of closer collaboration between educators with professional experience and the media industries they left for teaching seem obvious. But they apparently are not so self-evident in practice, at least not to the industry and perhaps not to promotion and tenure committees on many campuses. An undertone of the comments of many of the 652 journalism and mass communication educators responding to a summer 1990 questionnaire about their previous professional

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Pease, occasionally wistful about his own six years in the newspaper business, which ended in 1983, is managing editor of *Newspaper Research Journal* and a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate at Ohio University.

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experience was an almost mournful longing to return periodically to the front lines.

"I miss it," one 6-year veteran copy editor wrote. "After three years in the classroom, I've gotten into the academic rhythm. I enjoy my teaching and my students benefit from my professional experience. But some days I wish I could read the wire again."

Many journalism school faculty come to the classroom via newsrooms, ad agencies, PR firms and broadcast booths,

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bringing with them experience in the real world that increases their credibility with students and their schools' credibility with professionals, a notoriously skeptical bunch. The debate between the green eye-shades and the chi squares long has divided J-school faculties; in some places, educators with professional experience but without Ph.D.s feel like second-class citizens.

Professionals, on the other hand, regularly ridicule schools of journalism whose faculties — they say — have limited or old front-line experience. Take the Ohio metro daily editor who told a group of high school and college students that, "The only problem with journalism today is the journalism teachers."<sup>1</sup> Such sentiments — espousing the old adage, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." — seem alive in well among professionals in some newsrooms. Or it may be that self-conscious journalism and mass communication educators *think* they do.

As the comment of that former copy editor indicates, many professionals-turned-educators feel strongly about the value of keeping their skills and contacts up-to-date. "Professors should do more than talk — they should be able to do the work they talk about," a former PR practitioner from Indiana wrote in response to this survey of the professional activities of educators in the nation's schools of journalism and mass communication. Another respondent, a 17-year newspaper veteran, agreed: "Professional news experience is (the) major reason for what success I've had as a teacher."

"Such consulting is essential to remaining current or in front of the field," a California Ph.D. and former media manager said.

"Have to get more of the real world into the classroom," asserted a Michigan Ph.D. who worked in newspapers, advertising, PR and broadcasting for more than 20 years before moving on-campus. "One of the many concerns I have as a teacher of mass media reporting, writing, editing was how distant administrators stood from matters of mass media communication that were relevant to the real world.

"Too many ivory towers and not enough practitioners in mass media education," she concluded, echoing the cynicism of some media professionals toward journalism education.

Anyone dealing with newspaper and other media professionals knows that this sentiment is shared throughout the industry. At the same time, however, newspaper professionals say they'd welcome closer ties with colleges and universities in their areas, but they can't get journalism educators into their newsrooms.

James Ottaway Jr., chairman and CEO of Ottaway Newspapers Inc. and senior vice president of Dow Jones Inc., has long been a proponent of increased exchange between journalism educators and media organizations, along the lines of the mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships between law schools and lawyers and between doctors and medical schools. Ottaway, Everette E. Dennis of the Gannett Center for Media Studies and A.N. Romm, Ottaway Newspapers' senior vice president/news, wrote early in 1990 of the potential benefits to the industry of such an expanded relationship:

While some media professionals have a patronizing view of journalism schools as homes to entry-level skills courses taught by faculties of failed journalists, this generally is not an accurate view. Journalism schools offer advanced education and training in a variety of media and media-related areas. Courses in media management, the press and public opinion, communication law, media ethics and others are examples in the curriculum that augment and expand upon the basic entry-level skills courses.<sup>2</sup>

In 1985, Pease's pilot study of the interest among journalism educators in professional activities found interest levels high but communication of that interest to the profession low. "If newspapers only knew what rich natural resources for journalism exist beneath the tranquility of university

campuses, they would be drilling wells and digging mines at journalism schools everywhere."<sup>3</sup>

### "No one comes to me"

But despite expressed interest of those both in the newsroom and the classroom to increase contacts, there still isn't much traffic between campuses and media companies. And some professionals are frustrated about it. "You have to drag them in," complains John Christie, training editor for the Fort Lauderdale *News* and *Sun-Sentinel*. "No one comes to me." (See Hart, "Missed Opportunities," pp. 38-51.)

The same interest level and the same complaint come from newspaper editors offering assistance to teachers at the high school level. Gallinger's 1989 study of New England newspapers found that about three-quarters of newspapers responding had programs of some kind for local high schools. A

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research director

Rhode Island editor said, "While we have offered help, there seems little demand." A Connecticut paper offered newsroom internships for journalism teachers at 17 high school in their region; two responded, one saying it was "a good idea" but that she didn't have time.<sup>4</sup>

In Pease's 1985 pilot study of educators' professional activities, a research director for a mid-sized Pennsylvania daily made a similar comment. He'd welcome more involvement with local educators, he said, but "[I]f the local colleges want any help from me or want to offer me any help, the initiative must come from them," he said.<sup>5</sup>

In 1987, Judith Hines, then executive director of the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, and officers of the Newspaper Division of AEJMC collaborated to offer educators a means of returning to the newsroom. The Professor-Publisher Exchange Clearinghouse offered placement and salaries for educators interested in refreshing their newsroom skills for summer terms or sabbaticals. The program, publicized through the Newspaper Division newsletter and other AEJMC channels, received not a single inquiry or applicant.

On both sides of the industry/academy fence come recriminations; on both sides reside mistaken perceptions and missed opportunities. From the industry side comes a stated willingness to work more closely with journal-

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ism and mass communication educators, "We're willing to do anything," one Ohio editor said. "All they have to do is call." From the academic side come regrets that relations with professionals aren't better and an almost wistful eagerness for more and better

opportunities as consultants, interns, coaches and researchers.

Last summer, an editor from a Pennsylvania metro visited Ohio University's summer journalism workshop. When she left, she took with her the Kinko's teaching packets for three basic skills courses — reporting, newswriting and copy editing — and about 100 photocopied pages of class handouts from four faculty members. Last fall, she says, she revamped her in-house training programs to incorporate many of the borrowed materials.

What we have here — as they say in the movies — is a failure to communicate. On the campuses of hundreds of colleges and universities from Bellingham, Wash., to San Diego to Kalamazoo to Orono, Maine, to Tampa are educators with expertise in both mass media practice and mass media research who are not only ready and willing but eager to share their talents with local newspapers, broadcast stations, ad agencies and PR firms. If the responses of 652 educators to last summer's Journalism Educators' Professional Activity Survey are any indication, media companies are overlooking a valuable resource in their own communities.

Mass media educators have expertise, interest and desire to work in industry. The industry, by all accounts, could use infusions of new ideas and perspectives from such willing and experienced sources. What we need now is an agent.

## The survey

Last summer, in preparation for the *NRJ*-sponsored AEJMC convention program titled "Educating the Newsroom," questionnaires and post-paid return envelopes were mailed between June 15 and July 3 to 1,423

names taken at random from the membership list of AEJMC, with the request that they be returned by mid-July. The mailing was intended to go to all 2,400 AEJMC members, but was limited for reasons of cost and time. And we ran out of return envelopes.

Because of the short timeframe for response, and because many of those receiving questionnaires were away from their offices for summer activities, responses continued to come in through September.

The survey was an expanded version of Pease's 1985 professional activity survey of Newspaper Division members.

The primary purpose of the survey was to gauge the professional experience of journalism and mass communication educators and their level of interest in consulting and other professional work in the industry. Responses will be compiled into a catalog and directory for use by media companies.

The "Educating the Newsroom" panel session at the Minneapolis AEJMC convention in August brought together four newspaper professionals to discuss areas where the academy and industry might work together, where newspapers could use journalism educators in research, teaching, internship and other roles.

The questionnaire asked respondents about their previous experience as reporters, editors, writers and in other capacities in mass communication industries, whether they continued to work in the media as consultants from colleges and universities, and if they had any interest in further work in their respective communication areas.

Further, respondents who had worked previously as professionals or consultants were asked to indicate in what medium and in what capacity. The options were newspapers/magazines; public relations; broadcasting; and advertising. The general job descriptions included reporter/writer/editor, practitioner, newsroom/production, coach/writing coach, management/personnel consultant, project consultant, research and other.

Respondents were asked to list specific companies for which they had worked, and to describe their duties, remuneration, hours and level of interest in other such activity.

Another series of questions asked respondents about the effect of their professional activities on teaching, research and promotion and tenure issues. Finally, the questionnaire sought open-ended comments of respondents, academic rank and length of previous professional experience, and asked if respondents' names could be listed in a sourcebook.

## Results

Of the 1,423 questionnaires mailed, 652 were returned, for a 49.8 percent return rate. An additional 38 forms came back undeliverable. Considering that it was summer and that many of those to whom the questionnaire was sent were off campus, a nearly 50 percent return rate may be taken as a loud indication of interest on the part of journalism and mass communication educators in professional activities.

The earlier, 1985 pilot survey sent questionnaires to 594 Newspaper Division members, 83, or 14.1 percent, of whom responded.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, a large majority of those who returned the present survey said they had had previous professional experience; 583 respondents, or 89.4 percent, said they had worked previously in some professional capacity. Of the 69, or 10.6 percent, who had not worked professionally, 46, or 67.1 percent, expressed interest in doing so as a consultant or in some other capacity. (See Table 1.) From these results, it can be surmised that many of those electing not to respond to the survey had no previous professional experience.

Similarly, most of those returning the forms expressed interest in having their names and areas of expertise listed in a sourcebook for media companies seeking consultants or university-based contacts; 548, or 84 per-

**Table 1: Educators' previous professional experience & interest in further professional activity**

	Yes	No
Worked previously/now working in media industry	583 (89.4%)	69 (10.6%)
Interested in further professional activity*	548 (84.0%)	69 (10.6%)

N = 652

\* No response = 35 (5.4%)

cent of respondents, asked to be listed, indicating their interest in continuing or expanding their professional activities. Sixty-nine of the respondents, or 10.6 percent, asked

not to have their names listed; 35, or 5.4 percent, didn't answer.

The breakdown by media category and by occupation category (Table 2) indicates a wide breadth of experience among educators in the nation's schools of journalism and mass communication from which media compa-

Table 2:

**Who worked where**

**Educators' previous & current professional experience, by media & occupation category (N = 652)**

**Work/worked for newspapers/magazines \_\_\_\_\_ 385 59.1%**

reporting/editing	236	61.3%*
writing coaching	106	27.5%
management consulting	82	21.3%
research	127	33.0%
other	72	18.7%

**Work/worked in public relations \_\_\_\_\_ 287 44.0%**

practitioner	122	42.5%*
project consulting	124	43.2%
management consulting	61	21.3%
research	100	34.8%
other	46	16.0%

**Work/worked in broadcasting \_\_\_\_\_ 164 25.2%**

newsroom/production	73	44.5%*
coaching	29	17.7%
management consulting	33	20.1%
research	61	37.2%
other	33	20.1%

**Work/worked in advertising \_\_\_\_\_ 147 22.6%**

practitioner	50	34.0%*
project/account consulting	46	31.3%
management consulting	33	22.5%
research	75	51.0%
other	27	18.4%

\* occupation category percentages indicate proportion of those who work/worked in each media category



a California educator wrote. "Furthermore, I couldn't advise students without doing professional work."

One Pennsylvania respondent took it a step farther: "I believe a J-prof MUST work in media both before and while a prof. Otherwise, the prof might as well just be a 'researcher' who does useless studies that get into *JQ* and *J of C*."

"I would go beserk in academe if I did not have this foot in reality," wrote another Pennsylvanian, a copy editing professor with 21 years' experience on campus and 17 in the newsroom. "I learn far more than I ever would from journals, conventions, symposiums, etc."

In addition, wrote several respondents, professional experience and continuing activity improves an instructor's credibility with in the classroom and among media professionals. "It gives me fresh ideas for the classroom. Also, it increases my credibility with area news directors

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who see me working – they listen closer when I suggest a student for an internship or a job," a North Dakota broadcast professor wrote.

The benefits of professional activities off campus can be even broader, according to a tenured magazine professor from Illinois: "They are invigorating, allow me to renew myself, provide students with both 'war stories' and job placement. Plus, they pay the mortgage."

"I enjoy it," another agreed. "It paid my way through a Ph.D. and has helped put the kids through college."

A Missouri associate professor said outside work is essential for survival: "Professor salaries are not enough to keep a family, car and house payments afloat. Extra work is a necessity unless you're a monk or a eunuch."

Other respondents said that "invigoration" of professional work also prompts research projects. One tenured law professor wrote that a single consulting job can start a cycle he can't keep up with – "Pretty soon I had to turn down requests because I couldn't finish the last one I'd started."

A Utah faculty member agreed: "These activities provide grist for my campus research projects and help me stay up to date in the classroom."

Many respondents bemoaned the fact that industry has been reluctant to use academics. "I'm anxious for more businesses and corporations in our

area to realize that our college can be used as a resource for their communication needs," a Virginia public relations instructor wrote.

A media law professor from upstate New York said: "Media don't seem interested very much in anything we might offer."

If that's the case, the industry is missing the boat, others said. An emeritus professor and department head from Ohio with 15 years previous experience on a dozen newspapers wrote of the benefits of campus-newsroom exchange on both sides: "Outside work on or for news media is VITAL for both the media and the schools!"

"I see it as providing a service to the profession and to the professional world," an Indiana respondent wrote. "We can help them. They can help us."

"Lawyers shuttle to law schools. Doctors work in medical schools. Why can't we get closer to newspapers and broadcast companies?" a D.C. professor wondered.

From these and other comments, it seems clear that plenty of interest exists in expanding campus-industry exchanges. "How do I find who wants my services?" one respondent asked.

If the industry can, in fact, benefit from the expertise and experience residing on college campuses, and if those possessing those talents are willing and even eager to share them, the solution might be embarrassingly simple. Perhaps all that's lacking is communication of what's available on college campuses to media companies, and making professionals understand how academics might help them achieve goals. That shouldn't be an insurmountable problem for those who communicate for a living and those who teach communication skills.

## Notes

1. Ted Pease, "Back to the Newsroom: Journalism Educators' Professional Activities," *Newspaper Research Journal*, 7(2): 39-46 (Winter 1986)
2. Everette E. Dennis, A.N. Romm & James Ottaway Jr., "Commentary: The Case for Constructive Criticism of the Press," *Newspaper Research Journal* 11(2): 2-10 (Spring 1990).
3. Pease, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
4. Nancy Gallinger, "Still 'Captive Voices'? High School Journalism in New England Needs Help," *Newspaper Research Journal* 11(2): 12-27.
5. Pease, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
7. The question reads: "If you have worked or are now working in your area of expertise off-campus, please describe the kind of work."